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Fields of splendor

Sabrina Barreto
Santa Clara University

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Barreto, Sabrina, "Fields of splendor" (2015). *Canterbury Scholars*. Paper 1.

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Fields of Splendor



Sabrina Barreto

Fields of Splendor

∞ Sabrina Barreto

all poems by Sabrina Barreto
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First edition

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Printed in the United States of America

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for my grandparents

no me without you
thank you

Acknowledgements

The poet would like to thank the following institutions
for recognizing the corresponding poems:

University of California, Berkeley

Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize (2013)

Angels

Paris

Patient

The sunburst tomato I found in the garden

Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize (2014)

October

Orion

Olympic Anatomy

Vertigo

Santa Clara University

Shipsey Poetry Prize (2012)

Mehndi in Monsoon Season

Shipsey Poetry Prize (2015)

Summer Glimpses

Academy of American Poets Tamara Verga Poetry Prize (2014)

In England

Breton Brother and Sister, 1871

February

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∞ Bildungsroman

Children's Games

It's not easy, it's not fun,
And that is why it must be done.

October

In the season when pumpkins were upon porches,
And the hanging air was a cold spoon in the mouth,
I wore Wellingtons that waded above my ankles.

It was the first year, following my birth,
That brought good eel to the streams.

I witnessed winds whirl lifeless leaves into my open yellow bag,
And considered how fearsome it would be to see life leave a body.
It was a matter of chance to have misheard *pair o' dice* as *paradise*.

In that turquoise-painted house, all things were almost-not-new,
And only there did I hear voices that could not be replicated,
Not in location, context, or time, nor on any other All Hallows Eve.

It was clear early on that I would always pray,
And have hair like hawthorn after a rainstorm.

During the deluge, I made my first outside friend
With a cat the tint of toasted marshmallow.

When you were five

and we lived in Fontainebleau, the Impressionist in our family
painted a portrait of you in which only your eyes were in focus;
two honed ovals of mercury that shone like cathedral domes
in the Kremlin. What holiness was held within.

Many snows have since passed. Every winter solstice, when we
siblings haunt the woods to become engulfed by crystal and crispness,
you stare at the leafless branches of beech upon the sky, and say,
like the days when you were five, *Spilt ink on linen.*

The essence remains.

Open Sea Exhibit

Your mind's fissures are filling themselves with sunshine.

From behind a slab of glass,
you watch the sunfish cut the water,
tilt your head at the silver discuses in flight.

Passing through a corridor to the sea nettles,
your dendrites pull toward the sedating lace,
stung by the effulgence of venom and wet velvet.

Is it true that, one day, you, too, shall cease?

Breton Brother and Sister, 1871

after William Bouguereau

See the boy in my lap whom I clasp to my breast?
He belongs to my being, he holds my entirety.

All that has color is for him, let the monochromatic touch only me.
In his palms, he balances the golden globes he has plucked,
 then presses his head to my cheek.

A teal tunic covers his knees and spills onto mine.
Dimpled arms in plum sleeves dig into my elbows,
 a scarf I embroidered crosses his chest.

Hands are folded in prayer before I straighten his cap.
May he be bedecked with blessings,
 may his nails and skin and scalp always be clean.

He is as fair as I am tan, as leafy as I am earthen.
Could not my sleeves always be rolled up and rumpled,
 could he not always run in the fields?

Always will I tend and care, always will he tug my apron strings.
Sitting on a stump, forestside, my brother and I.

Too Tired for Bedtime Stories

My nightgown across the recliner,
a heavy head in the crook of its arm.
My father at the kitchen table, looking
up from papers to check the clock.

His arms in soft cotton, his feet
approaching the recliner.
His arms reaching down,
rounded in a scoop.

My weight over the crook of his arm,
the clock hushes on the kitchen table.
The nightgown brushing like a metronome against
cotton pajamas, the heavy steps up the stairs.

My father's feet gripping carpet to steady
two bodies, my head curling inward.
What becomes of childhood,
what becomes of childhood—

Father to Daughter

Child with my face in the female form,
I have taught you all I should.

The angle at which you hold your sword,
The distance between your feet,
How your balance must shift underneath.

Remember how to sit in and out of your hips
On a horse, the importance of mastery without
A metal bit or saddle, using your feet as hands
To pat and not your ankles as nails to dig.

Measure the tautness of the arrow you draw
Back against the firmness of the held frame,
Let your eyes follow the pointed line but
Do not linger. Hesitation is loss.

And do not forget the forest,
The trees that have sheltered us all our lives.

Nor the lake and well from which we drink,
The fields that harbor the splendors of the kingdom,
The chairs and beds into which we sink.

I pray that, as you are young and unwed,
You find joys in keeping beneath my roof
And leave courting on the periphery.
Dreams that cannot live are the ones

Who do not dare to become memories.
Neither brood over triumphs nor betrayals.
For all who are false, say, "I wish them well,
And I wish them to be away from me."

May you stay as you like it, and not run
To cut your hair. May each change not

Remain a stranger to you, and age dazzle you.
Let ink trump gold, breath outlast nights,
Songs replace remorse. And even when

All lights seem to go out, let your body's thoughts be a temple.
But erase all particulars, and recall something
With no questions at all: I am still alive, I am still loving you.

Heirloom

She tells me to never grow old
as she scrunches her vertebrae
into the couch's corner.

Every now and then,
I see coffins in the silhouettes of kites
and a string of ants on the grass as pallbearers.
I shrink at the window blinds that flutter
like a pleat of falling teeth on parade
before a denture cuts in.

She is repulsed by kitchen knives
after the surgery. As with meatcutters
at market, blood bonds to the blade.

Every chance,
I try to distract her with irrelevance
when she wakes, say that there is a narrow line
between a breath and a sigh, which she interprets
to be drawn on a deathbed. I insist that mortality
inspires enough outpourings to derive all the stars
from two tear ducts, and so I leave to gather
objects from the past, place them in my lap,
and call them heirlooms.

Behold

This roundness holds us,
And though it is no cradle,
Here are we two,
At the center,
And the earth round us knows no motion.

Here, we whirl within the O that encloses us,
Inside this circle you christen Faery Ring,
Toward what you declare to be The Door.

I but behold a garden gate,
And through the garden gate,
We will walk,
And we will share,
With no need for swiftness, for posted letters.

But in the meanwhile, you turn to me,
Turn your eyes baptized with green,
And something that welds wells from within.

Morning

Mourning doves huddled
in the mist,
leaves of the kumquat tree
shrouding the last fruit.

Inside the window,
a woman walks down
the stairs, each step
a thought, to arrive
at the landing
and call, “Where are you?”
 to a silent house.

The ground coffee
hasn't yet gurgled with water,
the stove unlit
and the electric bulb unflicked.
No girl kneeling
by the couch
 with prayers like fields
 planted with her own hands,
no body bending
in stretches, no face
to catch sunlight through glass.
But butter and jam
will slide on knives, milk
in a cup, bread to eat.

 One more day,
 then a holiday, gone.

Outside, the doves
draw close to their fledgling,
and leaves
fall over the fence.

Summer Glimpses

A song as I sweep the patio:
aloe, azalea, leaves, breeze.
A dragonfly flits back and forth,
as shaded as the stones that hold the door.
A folk dance in which the body exults,
motions that dwell in memory.

*

The brothers and sister from next door
mimic their mother yelling at them:
“Get down here! Be quiet! Stop that! No!”
They shift their positions inside and outside
of the playhouse, mix dolls with trucks on the grass.
They share their chorus, time tumbles past.

*

On the television, pictures of the Prince and Princess.
The couple is long dead. But a new prince is born
under the sign of a lion, and a name endures.
There will be nicknames, as well. In the living
room, a child (now grown) and parent (still young)
speak: “Hmm, Mama...” “Oh, Papa!”

*

The husband and wife from the other next door
leave their windows open. The woman mumbles.
The man screams, “Do you think I want to live like this?”
Outside, two preteen daughters collect loquat leaves
for their afternoon tea. They sit on blanketed cement
and gather together. Mutters and shouts resume.

*

On the radio at night, a pop song
from thirty years before plays.
A ballad that breathes moonlight, leaving, prayer.
I stop washing the dishes to listen and live in
the worded sound: *The dawn knows no reprieve.*
Same tune on the same station, ten years later.

*

One of the brothers from next door
practices the oboe, no longer off-key.
The other brother practices superhero
stories, the sister practices arabesque.
From the other next door, the two
daughters dance Bollywood in the patio.

In the evening, I close the upstairs window.
In a pan, the asparagus sleeping like soldiers
in a line. In the sink, a tub of plums.

Sleeping In

The morning, mercury,
conceals itself from the meridian,
and early hours have been employed
in pulling forth turnips, beets, carrots
from the soil. The rhubarb
is not yet ready.

Laundry lies wet against the washboard,
and there it will stay until your bones are satiated
by inactivity. Your face wears no smile, only the warmth
of placing scones into the oven with contracted arms.
The boughs of your body open, as though a gramophone
guides you into a hidden garden. You turn;
you have shut the door.

The colors of water
-spouting clouds play upon
the bedspread. You smell of
African rain; I keep my eyes
open and mouth shut.

Swimming pool

i.

It always begins with a baby
and ends in a temple.
Queens came to bathe
in a spa of liquefied jade,
washing themselves in minerals
and thermal wealth. Their skin drank
calcium, chloride, shining ions;
their bodies brined to heal
the infirmity of infertility
in hot springs. No one remembered
that the pillars were dedicated
to a virgin goddess, that the baths
were once segregated into
men, women, lepers.
The past was pagan.
But bathers still prayed in the waters.

ii.

A little girl and littler boy float in turquoise.
The rectangle is girdled with mountains.
They would recognize *magnesium* from their vitamins
but only feel its lull as they simmer in the valley's dusk,
their mother lounging on the pool's steps. They watch
the palm fronds that float overhead and shade their vision.
"Is there a volcano here?" the brother asks his sister.
"I don't know, why?" she asks back. "I saw mom
putting ash on her face," the brother explains.
"I thought that was mud," the sister responds.
"Hey, Waterbabies!" calls the mother, reaching for her robe.
"Time to go back, it's getting dark." The boy and girl kick
toward the shallows and roll into their hotel towels. Chlorine
perfumes their hair and the pool squelches in their sandals.
The mother walks to the gate and the siblings follow, the boy's
gaze turning to clip his shoulder. "The water isn't green
when I hold it in my hand," the boy observes,
taking in the springs. The girl takes his hand.
"Yeah, but it tastes like warm mint."

iii.

The young girl steps out of the cabana
into the pool, her lavender two-piece
lapping up the children's waves. Two
neighborhood boys are surprised to find
she has a belly-button and swim out
from the opposite end for a navel mission.
The girl is with another girl, teaching her
the dead man's drift. One boy circles
in front, the other closes the clasp.
One ducks underwater. The other at the back
snaps a string between shoulder blades.
Lavender fabric loosens. A gasp: a hand
clapped to a washboard chest, another hand
splashed to greet a cheek. An older woman
had told the young girl, "If a man acts
indecently, you have the license
to slap him." A squall: the first boy
yawps *Vicious!*, the second cries *Witch!*
The girl answers, "You broke the spell."

iv.

A public high school conceals its Olympian pool,
harbors students by a baseball diamond. Early winter
frosts the green with shards of stars. Still, several
gym classes join in the water, except for several girls
who must follow its tiled frame. A young but older
girl strays from the buoyant clumps of bodies to track
the outer edge. She swims in straight lines to talk
to her walking friend and her hair becomes oil on water.
This is the last time they will see each other
before the October overdose.
Her friend's hair turns to ebony icicles in the air.
The friend bends her knees to her toes, tells the swimming girl,
"You should wear your hair down more often."
A whistle is blown, goals are set, youths group for polo.
The girls detangle in opposite directions when
the treading begins. Someone shoves the swimmer
underwater and her hair whirls into black hurricanes.
She lets it loose until her friend would have turned sixteen.

v.

The first pool found its course
outside of the ocean
and into the desert. Man's hands
fitted clay bricks with gypsum
to pace alongside ledges
thickened with tar
while flushes of bricks
stepped into the water.
Surrounded by sand and tan, the sky
was only color, under which bathers
were clarified anew. A priest
would pour a cup
and say, "Lift the chalice
to your lips and taste."
Each grace was given a name.

vi.

A woman rests her head on the edge
of an infinity pool, leans into the tropical
cliff that vanishes into the horizon.
Palm trees rustle on hills behind her
but the nearest sound is the water as it eddies.
Any movement severs symmetry.
Some ripples coax memory. The woman
remembers a story with a pool where flappers
danced and a promise drowned.
Water is elegy, word is prayer.
Bodies don't simply lie beside or dive
into pools. Minds swim, and
undulations and depths seduce.

Alzheimer's

She heard it fall, the man in flannel's means of intellect.
(A hand on a hand) *You need to eat! Even birds tuck into meat.*
He forgot how to chew, forgot the faces he once knew.

She was here at his death. He was there at her birth.
(Hands circling chin, cheeks) *I remember you! Indeed, I do.*
Neither could forget the other loving them through and through.

The Friendship Knot

Beach Trip

I've missed the air,
weighed with the fog of salt
and unscuffed blue. A zephyr
guiding an arrowhead of pelicans,
a pinwheel of gulls. Sandpipers
that skirt the foam.

Worshiper of the luck of the sun,
the pounded sediment has a touch
sentimental to the underbellies of feet.

I've missed how the heat soaks in
through the car windows. It soothes
sinew and bones, chilled from the water
and seaweed slime beneath the bluffs.

I've missed how the fishermen's boats
bring shrimp and rockfish and clams to
the diner that bring sandwiches
and soup bowls and fish n chips
to tables and stomachs.

Nets turn inside-out
and hands open to zip
a jacket over skin—
I've missed you.

A Café Called Diner

for Jess

Two young women sit in the evening at the counter together. The diner is decorated with paper cutouts of hearts and cupids, the booths are full with retirees, teenagers, young families. One young woman with generous measurements wears shorn hair. One young woman wears a washboard chest and grows out her cropped cut. They are not interested in each other's bodies. But when they uncase a guitar and sing a duet, one plays the man and the other plays the woman. They can accept this without attachment—not like going home, but being at home. Both remember sitting beneath a magnolia tree and plucking and warbling *until there is no you or me*. At the diner, they rejoice over stacks of pancakes and breakfast specials. One gobbles and utters *Thank you, Jesus!* and *Oh Lord on a Bicycle!* One nibbles and hums *Forty days, Forty nights*. They forget that certain foods are too heavy for grief, so they ask for coffee to quell their stomachs and temper the night. They set aside the syrup dispensers and remember why they came. One begins. *Thank you for worrying about me. Someone said that after I have my anxiety attacks, I either avoid people or push them away. I think he's right.* One looks and listens. The first continues. *I identify as bisexual and thought pleasantly of suicide in junior high.* The second responds. *We're not pre-teens anymore. And you're still you.* The silence wears a smile, wipes its eyes. They finish their food. Buttermilk batter disappears, eggs spill ichor-blood onto hash-browns, and the last plate is clean with the conclusive swipe of a toast slice. The one who came to speak says, *I want to believe. I just... I wish alot of things.* She says alot as one word.

Yoga

With detachment and devotion,
your face, full up toward the sky,
reflects the heavenly bull's blue.

There is some sense of destiny,
notwithstanding the constellations.

With a curry-colored scarf upon your shoulders,
you smell of perfumed spice, cumin, nutmeg.
You hold a marigold, are the universe made flesh.

This is not a matter of fulfilling dharma.
This is yourself in the cosmic order.

Schoolteacher

This earth, that blue, shall pass away,
but words will not.

You taught them three types of languages through lines:
two arrows -- one straight, one zig zag -- and a single swirl.

They're nodding their heads,
but you cannot know their hearts.

Yet even before chalkboard columns in a centurion stance,
in the settle of stillness, your dominion is direction.

Berry Picking

You went wandering out into the meadow
As the day began to grey from the valley mist
And you thought to bring your straw bonnet
For a basket, only to abandon it with your apron
On the knob of the kitchen door. Carrying

A handkerchief instead, you knew the cotton
Square would suffice for a shrub-side bite.
But by the hedgerow, an early mourning
Would commence. Purpled lips and indigo-
Dyed linen were not plucked assurances
Of the sweet taste of blue. Such stains
Were meant to persuade and prove
Their infiltrating depths. And they did.

Sorrow is no delicacy, though it has one to it,
Ripening in the highbush before the hand-
Thrusted harvest. The blue berries fall
Without shaking, fall as often as one forgets
The inability to walk barefoot at all times.

Reverence & the Friendship Knot

I kept your words close to me
in the evening, recalling
the finch that bathed
in the courtyard fountain
while we lunched.

We felt the songbird's presence
and the trickling
of the small basin
in the same moment,
turning toward ripples.

Your eyes, with the lightness
of feathers in an envelope,
rested upon what you
wondered was a sparrow.
Your breath was quiet.

In its silence, I blessed the air
of the afternoon.
My faith in
walking barefoot
had been restored.

The fields beyond the house are dewy
and the ground breathes deeply.
The bog where my body laid
at daybreak has become covered
in lingonberries.

∞ Fair Weather

Mountain climbing, stream calling

“Hurry up,
the sun is going down!”

I hear
you cry

on either side
of the Apennines.

Yet dark or light,
sway or might,

we can hear
frogs in the creek.

Sunset

I see the dusk through
orange fingertips.
I open my mouth
and try to swallow the rays as they fade.

I see the dusty sun through
contracting eyes.
My mouth opens
and I stomach the death of the sunlight whole.

I see grapefruit in
a bowl upon the table,
and know that humans
need no dark rooms to capture and preserve.

Sequoia

The redwoods. I hear
that they are relics from
the days of mastodons
and dinosaurs. They tell me
no wrong, demand that
I write *truly* like *cruelly*.

Sempervirens. Towering tree,
will you be a tyrant if I attempt
to scale your parapet? My tears
are drifting upwards with the rain
that travels down through the grooves
in your trunk, the rain that swims
within your ringed centuries.

Morphing megaflor. The years have been
a transitory story, yet giants do not-
will not, uproot. They migrate mistward
by night, rove coast and grove by day,
sprout and bud always. But when
Hyperion falls in the east, is following
suit what the woods, their own haven,
will choose—

Winter Solstice

It is dreadfully cold
And shadows warm

The standing stones.
Equinox is not far off.

The daylight was short,
The darkness, long—

Once, I had too much time
To think of you.

Orion

Dying stars stud the ground and stir your head.
Out here, all's about brier and bark, nettle and nest,
And heaven's hangnail presents itself upon a blue blanket.

The sycamore above us has scattered a leafen sawdust spread.
Back there, we cannot make good choices when we hunger so,
But beyond, hunger has driven us to decide in favor of constellations.

I think I shall sleep atop the long neck of a tree.
Out here, the sky is far less heavier than sod,
And tonight, I want to remember the light of this holy day.

Persephonic Paeon

Papyrus sheets stained
with the blood of pomegranates
promise good luck. In the
parasolled twilight, I know that
I can swallow a jewel. Droplets slide
from fingers to snap and slip across a tongue
in straight trails. Lips, in their satisfaction, suspend
the definition of *shue* for the sake of sumptuous
seeds—a spongy globe of succulent,
beaded berries is worth worlds of
barrels of apples.

Shall I make a poultice
from this pallid pulp? Fruit fatale,
I could concoct a sweet soup from
your jasper juice. I would propose that
the prosperity of your ruby pebbles should sew
scarlet strings upon all pantheons. I would proclaim
the palate's paradise like a pendulum in a palace. Plant
you in my spirit, and I should speak of fertile feeling
for all my seasons. I shall pass
among the pomegranates, I shall pass
through ponderings in pieces.

It isn't even spring

When the encyclopedia went out of print,
you sighed before lifting your eyes from grasshoppers to butterflies,
and we saw that all the crocus trees were confused.

In response, you broke off a branch of blossoms—
how you sliced the air with your assassin's limbs!—
and decided to decorate the day.

After Market

A woman, arms full with flowers, drifts through
The doorway. Her hair runs behind her as
She floats in front, skin of light walnut hue.
Perhaps she has lost her blossom basket.
I think luminosity has sheathed her
So that her soul is in bloom—she, too, knows.

The sunburst tomato I found in the garden

How I fill the hours
with minutiae
and among earth's
strangest creatures
only to uncover tedium.

But always, the twenty years,
my childhood on the periphery,
your thinning hair, all between us.

Then, nothing.

Distance collapses
and I dissolve
into a bowl of steam
and parboiled rice
you place before me.

Departures and returns—
I don't believe that the weight
of space that separates
lends me lungs
so I can breathe
below the gulf.

So I show you
the sunburst tomato—
two globes fused
into one at each other's cusps—
and say, "This is us."

Paris

To you, o universe, we give our most beloved star.

Here, we shake blankets of blossoms
from cobblestone passageways
and weave them into our hair
and read snatches of love letters
before the twilight catches us
as folding accordions remind couples
of solitude.

Like the loneliness of water lilies
in a pond, like the small strokes
of Impressionism, we drift in largeness
until the beauty in all things
is discovered. Beauty in a bag of cherries
or bridges to connect clefts
or a dancer's withered feet.

We toast to you, we embrace you,
we present to you days of damp chestnut trees,
with rowboats and riverbank lunches
and baguettes toasted beneath pink skies.

∞ Misses, Kisses

Missing You

There is a leaky faucet
 beneath a thrown-open window.

I know of no repairman,
 so I breathlessly gaze
 beyond the kitchen sink.

Open air and shutters

Even after five years,
my consciousness still keens.

So I take a pitcher
out into the morning
to gather sunlight.
The ceramic
is the texture of milk,
sliding from my hands;
both handle and base
curve like parted lips:
a rotated arch on top,
a thick step, under.

It is said that,
nearby the lake I ellipse,
a woman gave birth in a cave
during the winter
beneath a beacon star.
The child she bore
blessed the eucalyptus trees
with watercolors of rainbow hue.

I won't see the water basin,
I don't see the bark peeling
maroon and apple green
and olive and tangerine.
I didn't turn forward.
I only waited to see

if there was someone
at the Dutch doors.
What is the word
for what I once felt?

Or things I don't want to keep
hidden anymore.

Lightning

a villanelle

I don't need to know what lightning looks like.
The chest and breath grasp what thoughts cannot.
I feel electricity even when it is not night.

Shock is not simply conduction. It is a spike
that thrives when moisture meets heat; warm and cold, caught.
I don't need to know what lightning looks like.

The atmosphere, polarized, twists a kite,
is contemptuous of potential, draws clouds as lots.
I feel electricity even when it is not night.

Charges build and concentrate and turn ice white.
I wanted to collide the eternal with air so hot.
I don't need to know what lightning looks like.

It is life that must bring currents, not my might,
between ground and sky to string humid dots.
I don't need to know what lightning looks like.
I feel electricity even when it is not night.

Hart Hall on Hearts' Day

It was as though I happened upon
 an heirloom on a sidewalk,
 discovering their cabin in the forest,
 a cottage leafier than the limbs of trees,
 with a wind-washed canopy overhead.
Sheltered by cedars, they two were sturdy
 as timber in the mossy woodland,
 stalwart as the boulder basin of a waterfall.
From the Vikings to the Valkyrie,
 they were of warrior stock,
 worthy of divine mead.

A North Country couple—
 a freckled doe and an antlered stag—
 who knit their own garments, fell their
 own lumber and chopped their own logs,
 netted their own trout in the stream.
With a bear emblazoned on both breasts
 and a tree in between, I donned the sweater
 they had sewn to celebrate the rosy feast of doves.
Then I knew.
 I don't want refinery.
 I want Reality.

Favored

Hunters do not suppose
they might be hunted. I have walked
with a crescent moon circling my brow,
have worn the wilderness like the hounds
that bound beside my silver chariot.
Nymphs were my companions.
We would hunt in the night.

Only the moon
joined our company in valleys that rose
and fell with cypress trees. After a pursuit,
a frenzy, a death, I would rest
in a pool in the woods, the sky quiet
and nymphs in a bathing ring. And now
I am thinking of the man whose hands
are like my father's.

His greatest praise
was modesty, his hands were giant captors,
he tread on his father's waters.
It was no natural phenomenon.
I said nothing on hunts among islands. Equals
could speak in silence. The Fates blessed the days
with game, fire, laughter. Summering became
foot racing and evenings gathered round stories.

There are stories I cannot even tell myself.
Like how the most handsome are most hunted.
When I turn, I see arrows in bows
in the branches of trees, leopards in the sand,
the grin of an ax in boulders and diadems.
I cannot look at the stars.
Constellations dim my eyes before I draw
the clouds at night.

But even archers
leave the dark woods. And I suppose,
from where I stand, the air above the sea
is not itself without salt.

Tulip

I will be left soon
in exchange for the rose. But you
who have touched me, remember
that I bloomed first in the season,
when the earth began to warm.

I began below, turning under soil.
I know nothing of the shadows
of clustered leaves and thorns. My color
will always be less intense, but, even pale,
my face opened to the sun who rose
to reign the day.

You did not see
my cheeks deepen into my core.
But you will remember
that I am not the kind to be cut.

Perennial

May I never lose
the hands of the rain,
the hands I have
when I touch you.

You call me to come
to you, run to you,
to never shun you.
Doesn't spring fulfill

the promise of return?
Even if I were a tree,
I would grasp my skirt
of roots and send no

telegram to the forest.
Vines survive because
they entwine. We bow
to cloudbursts and bend

toward autumn.

Nosey

Here among the peach cabbage roses,
 passing my cheek along all petals I seek,
 I can do none other than slip
 into each blossom's business.

Caresses conquer kisses;
 I'll stay coasting for now.

Divorcée

a pantoum

The wine we drank at our wedding,
When the crowd cried, "Just kiss!"
The Tuscan sunflowers and quilted bedding:
There's nothing that I miss.

When the crowd cried, "Just kiss!"
We rested in the shade of summer's lendings:
There's nothing that I miss
More than the languor before rending.

We rested in the shade of summer's lendings:
Rooms with vineyard views, a honeymoon of listlessness.
More than the languor before rending,
More about what I felt, what I feel less.

Rooms with vineyard views, a honeymoon of listlessness,
After hours, the evening's slender arms bending.
More about what I felt, what I feel less,
Less about years and more than mending.

After hours, the evening's slender arms bending
Into a full moon, a long day, a dress.
Less about years and more than mending,
Less than two, more than one to confess.

Into a full moon, a long day, a dress,
Out of a fortnight, the candlelight ending.
Less than two, more than one to confess
To things that cannot hide away despite tending.

Out of a fortnight and candlelight ending,
The Tuscan sunflowers and quilted bedding:
All things that cannot hide away despite tending.
The wine we drank at our wedding.

Mehndi in Monsoon Season

In order for me to live,
I had to pretend you died.

Days of blue monsoons saw the carnation skin of full moons.
In this season of humidity,
the rice farmers' families found the time for dreams.

An embrace is your voice igniting the dark.
When the matchsticks were struck,
the schoolchildren spoke of mist on my cheeks.

We weren't walking together,
we only traded maps.

Tissue-thin turtlenecks do not belong to sweater weather.
It is too wet to paint outdoors, and
I am too toasty to stay in the café.

Bohemians belong to themselves.
A crocheted crown of daisylace swims in the lagoon,
like muslin sequins on marl, like chalky henna on hands.

Plea

No – please stay.
I find it very calming.

Emotion is opiate enough.

Man and Oasis, Woman and Mirage

The shadows of the window screen crosshatched
the heat of your body; a trace of perfume sank
into your suprasternal notch at dusk. You still had
sand in your hair as I was folded into linen and
pillow, and when you shook your head,
I was dropped into the desert.

Saffron was smeared upon my lips, spiced oil
was smudged into my brow. You wore only white
and spoke of cool pools. In essence, wishes.
Supplication to the daughters of a sandstorm ocean—
anything to soothe your burnt blooms below the disk.
But a bathtub won't help when the mind howls within
this palace of sand and the heavens fill themselves
with blonde sugar swirls. What should be of use?

A cavern, with its delicious, damp heart.

You might have swum up through the sediment
and stone. I may have watched the stretch
of your neck, the line of nimble limbs as I poured
the tea or spread the marzipan. Swoon. The taste
of sticky dates and sap. Capsize. A plunge
down to the sea and into a courtyard. You suppose
that in another life you'll be another wife but
believe that marriage is another fiction.

A folk song murmurs in the night.

∞ Anatomy

Patient

The body speaks.

Some swim for long stretches
in between islands.

Most wait. Wait the length of darkness
to ponder what was swallowed.

This is how we savor fear,
like hidden paintings in a cave.

After dancing

These limbs that sit in the bathtub
ask to be curled. I acquiesce,
gathering the bones to my body.
Steam clings to the water (release)
and the pale walls sweat (recline).

I ask to be granted the grace
to find the space where time is still,
where the winter sun does not deceive,
where the stars need no night.

Olympic Anatomy

remembering the summer Olympians, London, 2012

I love what you can do with your body.
How you refuse to do other than
 renew its accomplishments,
 its capabilities.

Yours is a control which compels and attracts.

The tug of gravity has helped you to sculpt
 a structure so compact,
 so disciplined.
Training is your existentialist philosophy.

Muscle, cerebellum, spirit: all are supple.
Lion, elephant, lamb gather
 and emerge as ripples,
 as flames.

Your gymnasium serves as an academy of tenacity.

The body has become a released tree
 with your fingers as roughened roots,
 your knees as knotholes.
And your face loves me with one look.

Vertigo

Hear and heal
Are of equal measure
As balance resides
In the ear.

Back

Not a string of vertebrae straightened or swerved
Not attached and floating ribs in a bird cage
or a cord transmitting messages
 from the main station to satellites

Nor the clavicle's estranged quotation marks
the drift of shoulder blades into fascia into muscle
Nor the marrow breathing and bubbling from thick calcium

Not even the great plain of skin as sheath
summer's tanlines of light clothing
or a tucked-in tailbone exposed by a shirt

But the second underbelly the bared arches of feet
eyes without peripheral vision Or the upright strength
of a fist clenching and releasing fingertips' intimacy
the gasp of nails before they are torn from flesh

February

The fever struck my body
The fever stole my sleep
The fever took the last day
of the week.

∞ Warfare

Parable

You think that by laying your sword at the foot of the sick
you can make peace.

Would that this were a matter of touching a tassel
to heal a hemorrhage.

Chickahominy River

Virginia, 1607

Spirit, help me to speak of life.

I still see the skin of my people
plastered with war paint.
What makes one wish to know
everything about the world
and nothing of oneself?

Her voice; it is the stroke of ripples
upon water as fingers fan out. The gulls
call, "In-no-sense, in-no-sense!"
She sways her hands to her forehead,
then outstretches them to the tributary.

Spirit, you give life to us. I follow you,
yet know not where you live.

The sunlight, spinning his hair into copper
as he treads in dappled shadow. Does
he not know? The oaks talk, too.

The buttery touch of a deerskin
apron, cartwheeling through
the meadow, fitted to her skin.
The wind blows backwards
and her wreath of turkey feathers
waves as the draught threads itself
into a crowded corn field.

There is stillness in the marshes. Not a draft.
No air in motion but the wit of wild finches
at the floodwaters. The river feels the paddles
that tattoo its body and the perforations heal
in quick closes till the rowers feel the mud
upon their oars and the canoe can no longer glide
along the looking glass of the greenery and sky.
The trunks of fallen cypress knot to the tide
before rain pelts the quicksilver flow. Past
the swamp's sodden plains, across the waves,
no pale man will heed the rumble of
"Drive them into the sea!"

The stream glistens atop its stones
whilst the noonday sun peers
through the mounting stalks. Maize.
Shake the tassel, pull the blade,
remove the sheath, and find
their ears, listening.
Their arms, reaching,
as they rise, rise.

Consecrated by smoldering sage she has gathered
and accepted into her lungs, she mats ash
and the chalk of crushed yew onto her skin.

The moment she extended her arm
toward his life, she was given,
she was bound, to him. But when she,
so crestfallen, excavated his eyes
as he spoke of the raccoon in the snare
and the eagle without a nest,
he suppressed the certitude
that she could not belong to him.

She crosses the sand to enter
the lapping water
and he wades beside her
for a bath. Close by,
the men ravel and string
the nets for sturgeon.

There is no lands' end. Only
the dry and the damp; a moistness
both malleable and immutable.
A moisture which carries all
that is good.

Gleaning firelight into her nostrils, she summons
embers from whence she gives thanks, elongates life,
grows out a mantle of earthen hair until
the pearls that trim her braid bristle
against her chest. Branches stir.
He regards the slightness of her breasts
as a dignity of reticence.

He turns over tables, wishing to return. Tracing
his jaw with a feather from her hands, from days
of heaven, he enfolds himself into that dream,
casts himself into the distance. An exiled dream
that is the sole truth.

Cupping the lantern's gleam with her left hand
and clasping its handle with her right, her flesh
is illuminated, unraveled
by the rectangular shafts of amber.
The windows are paneless, but she is not.
She peers into the cobalt blur, dips the full extent
of her fingers into a pool of rainwater, and smears
her vision with ultramarine, the tint smudged
into the cedars' silhouettes at dusk.

Constancy, steadiness—not on earth.

The wooden walls of the cabin, permeated
by the musk of cured tobacco, smell stronger
of the smoke in the blackness. She can only
perceive the scent of his hair spread upon
the hut's swept dirt floor: gunpowder and brine.
The beam flickers. She shudders.
Convictions rest in her clavicle
and remembrances brush across high cheekbones
in the same manner that questions cross her lips
only to cleave her bared eyes. Suspire.
She swerves her head aloft the length of her neck,
twisting to see who is behind her. It is only
the eventide, who has brought bygones in response,
like perch returning to the hunters after the frost.

Spirit, what they
knew in the forest:

to be.

The Age of Lead

Ours is the Age of Lead.

The weapons we wield are blunt
and only those who can spare the expense
hire slaves to sharpen tarnished arms.

I have tried to wrest
a steadfast hold on my shield,
but there is fire in my hand.

In our bygone Iron Age,
Smiths forged blades that would not break,
Broadwords that would bite.
Only, we overlooked the pliancy of gold,
Just as newlyweds fail to notice
The thinning of their promise rings
In those first few years.

Supple metal natures
do not thicken over time.

Stores of barley and mead swiftly sieve
Through the digits of an openhanded king.
And once the stores are sacked, he will understand
That to be drunk in public is not the equal
Of being besotted in the hall.
A minstrel in the street falters
In his song, a broken oath:

“From womb to tomb,
I consecrate myself to you.”

Thanes become troubadours.
The stone erodes; only
its rune does not decay.

We once swore to interweave
our tapestries; now, the firedrake moths
are at our looms.

Once a story

The setting was a land of earth garnet,
Its heaven ablaze with white blindness.
Here, it was said, a lady once brushed a horse's mane.
Here, it was written, a knight once sat and drank his tea.

I did not grow and sleep to hear stories without heroes,
To be told of those who chose to fall into a jagged sea.
New tales talk, they say that all swirls melt.
New tales tell me that I, too, shall soon dissolve.

Brown Horse, Blue Sky

Brown horse against a blue sky,
Ploughing fields of tartan,
Shearing stone from soil
To unravel marl like wool.

Brown horse beside a blue sky,
Standing watch at the harvest,
Waiting for the sweat and clay
Of tilling's toil to be washed.

Stripes of scarlet and blue meet bellowing brass.
Faces crowd, dampness unfurls. A boy whistles
To his horse when the captain reads from a scroll:
Ban those too young to bleed, the cavalry in need.

Brown horse beyond a blue sky,
I enlisted when I came of age, went into the trench.
Young men weren't told of chemists who oversaw war,
Nor of meadows stale with mud, wire, corpses torn.

Brown horse upon a blue sky,
I was bandaged after the blast, hobbled on nurses' arms.
They then told me of a horse who rose like a lantern on water,
Who came out of the teargas fog after the barbed blight.

My bandage moistened. They said my sight would return.
A nurse laid me down in softness and let me pull the sheets.
She spoke low. "I hear the horse is being sent home.
Soldier's word." Brown horse of the blue sky, she did not lie.

Revelation and Renaissance

Apocalypses are as common
as eucalyptus. Oil is in the air,

and with the smallest sneeze
of a spark, the globe is ablaze.

For endtimes and embers
are as inextricable as
fire-eaters and phoenixes.

War

He lived in a cottage by the lake, in a time before
his profession was pallbearer. He had brought her
to lake country, where the heavens waded into
the still waters and hours dripped. She was a blue lady
in a diaphanous shift, wearing the sky against bared skin.
The sheep were in the daffodils when she laughed, and
the fields were filled with leftover starlight.

When he was young, in this place where wizardry
became his study, he was alone. Only the growing
flowers made the magic, built the hideaway home.
He showed her across the meadow and over the knolls
to his ring of secrets in stolen time. She was frightened
upon releasing his hand, she wanted to stay, to say—
instead, she told him to talk of his despair, in the fear
of having him disappear. Too many brick walls
were falling when all of their worries
were wrapped in a florist's shop.

He brushed off the battleships and turned to thoughts
of castles in the clouds as she swept away cobwebs.
A child's heart could not change. Her straw sunhat
covered his face when they kissed.

Magician

I think that you must have been born in a garden or near a church. It had to have been somewhere close to the sky, where hands are raised to the rivers of the mountain wind. You were probably born in shearing season beneath a milkless blue bowl, when your mother's breasts were not yet full. Your father touched her shoulder the night he heard her play the cello at Royal Hall. He was a photographer. And somehow it came that they had come together at a sun-storm farm in the North.

But you did not pick poppies in your first years. What you remember most are rock fences, rainy crags, and that you were given a sheepskin coat the year your father grew out his beard and your mother was pregnant again. One winter, your favorite book flew from you and was swept away into the sea. Perhaps it was then that you decided to be a man of few words. Perhaps the moment had decided whether a child's heart and its color would quiver, when you knew that you wanted to talk about eternal things.

Angels

I think that most angels do not have names.

So it goes for the majority of messengers
and handmaidens, divine and profane.

French film at Dunkirk, 1940

The cinema is empty, abandoned
after the armistice and again
before the evacuation. He has stepped
down from the bar above into rafters
and cobwebs, pulling back frayed velvet.
Someone had left the reel running, and it
is caught on a single repeating sequence.
Monochrome, mostly grey. Two noses
touching as they pull away and draw into
one another endlessly, two noses framed
by waves of hair on the right, a coat lapel
and fedora on the left. He turns away.
He does not know his blood will be
infected on this shore and reach his heart.
The other men will not know he had made
a pillow from string-wrapped envelopes,
the letters dog-eared, each one beginning
with *Dear*.

In England

The green ground of this land,
its boundaries made of chalk,
and the grass of centuries past
absorb me
and drink my body
in a slow but single gulp.

Our bodies are mapped
with stories to outlast
the talc lines of the land.

Timetables and platforms
and polished steel converge
with the rise of the conductor's wave
at King's Cross;
trains depart,
smoke arrives.

We die, we die—
so how could I do other
than love you?

♻ Americana

On the Road

It is said that I have chosen a highway
and long since walked a line.
I traverse the route on foot, walk without
pursuit, pause without stopping
at ranches' and cobblers' doorsteps.

There was a town on the coast
where I stopped at a storehouse for boots,
their heels standing on shelves from rafter to floor.
I wanted to bottle the musk of the leather in its
youth, the odor richer and meatier than petrol from
California rigs dusted with gold, than men with waxed
moustaches who ate their steaks bloody and their
potatoes wet with butter. But my desire was not to distill.
There are things that cannot be relinquished, I would say,
and would refuse to uncork the trapped scent. I now
preserve it in the shirt of a cowboy who
made me one of the men.

It was said that I long chose my highway
and have followed it from birth.
I have done no more than spend the time
winding through the vestiges of trees
and among their cousins, the cacti,
to listen.

Telegram from Georgia

Grief on a peach-colored card:
only if you hold it close
can you see it bent in half.

Migrant Mother

after Dorothea Lange

A kerosene lamp slumps, decapitated,
beside the rain-bleached tent of ripped
patchwork. The shanty is supported by a cleaved
chestnut bough. Its bark is peeling as it fades in flaxen
curls, peeling at the rate that the migrant mother's
sleeves are unstitching themselves. Her infant
is crouched in her lap, her sandy-haired
six-year-old is at her back. 1936.
Nipomo, California. Hungry.

The infant's tufts of curls are still soft, and his melon skin
has yet to see a scrub. The crocheted boots encasing his
toes want darning; the shivering cotton onesie cushioning his
body has not touched a washtub. Closed eyes conceal
squinted visions of milk streaming through a supple nipple—
he is the last of seven.

The freckled child curls her lower lip, and blood rushes
to sun-soaked cheeks. The strands of straw on her
head have sifted sod; the threadbare collar on her
neck cannot trust a washtub. Worn eyes trace
tempests of dust on the miscarrying soil—
she is the fifth of seven.

The migrant mother's fingers are curled in continuation of the
tributaries that converge under her hardened skin, and her hair
is spun into a brown tail of broken tales. The longitudes of age
and latitudes of apprehension map a forehead forever shown to
afternoons in pea fields that are not hers, the opal engagement ring
winks against a gingham house dress washed with dirt. She
is covered in tattered will that has been strained by her
back and biceps. Her muscles whimper, for they cannot cower.
Thin lips are painted in a proud frown; a creased chin is powdered
with the talc of poverty. Beneath carved arches, eyes glint
in their search for the round figure of satiation—
this is her nobility.

Sharecroppers, 1939

Momma's arms are crossed, with twenty-five years
that feel like sixty-five, and three hundred and fifty miles
that feel like three thousand five hundred, behind her.
She's leaning on a wooden beam above the Mission bell,
blue eyes as prominent as the field of freckles upon her leather
skin. Her mouth opens to a sun-streamed white picket fence,
and her eyes crinkle with a printed shirt. Burdock hair is braided
behind her ears. With a pearl placed into each lobe, evidence of both
demurity and a wedding present, she counts her blessings
by the things she gives.

Baby, you are parked in a Chevy, and now Momma is walking across
the squatter camp's stream with your older sister. She'll come back
real soon, once she fills her field worker's pail with drinking water. Tonight,
in a reclaimed rocking chair, she'll open a ragged pamphlet and sing you
hymns, and Poppa will call your sister Teacup once he's done with the peas.

If he could, he would buy your Momma a yellow house and a violet kimono, he'd
take you all to the lighthouse, away from these twisters, and to a sea of falling stars
he'd weave into your nightgowns. But all he can offer the three girls is a tambourine
shook in a recycled train seat, so he christens the darkness with stories, recalling
a string of summer lights and a pavilion of dancers around the town's party tree.

Dying, Mama, Apple pie

There is a sudden sun that blooms after rain.
Keep the water simple. It washes the white
of the church the same as the colors of the trees.

Keep the casket closed. I can remain faithful
without my sight. I can christen secrets like
watching the birth of cotton from softened thorns,
like watching the birth of cloth from field to hand to bag to gin.

There is a slavery to absolutes. Mash the yams, fry the okra,
butter the grits. Sharecroppers can't expect to cover territory
when the sun bleaches the dust and sweat turns to drink.

Mama says, "Hominy is my homily." Papa says,
"It's a pleasure to cook with a sharp knife."
The child says, "August rain."

I'm still walking. Those who did not come to the funeral
will worship at their own shrines. Some will be crying
in their kitchens as praise. A sister will lament, "God
made her beautiful for me to see." Others will say *Amen*.

A few generations, and the century has passed. Was it
a prayer or a hymn that read *Good God, make not sacrifice
the lord of my life*. One time Mama said, bringing the coffee pot
and apple pie, "This isn't confession, this is reconciliation."

Nuit musique

after Edward Hopper

The restaurant is emptying.
A glass on the dark bar counter,
hotplate shut off for the night.
One man in a white uniform
wipes down the counter opposite,
pauses to refill a customer's decaf.
My friend and I lean over
on our side. He has finished
a chilled slice of cherry pie. I
am draining my ice water. Our
hands make a light crosshatch
after the man, glancing at my friend's
blue suit and my red dress, asks,
"Have you escaped a baby in white?"
The evening is warm, the city is teal,
the counter is gleaming.

∞ Snark and Sparks

Reservations

Think what you will.
You won't know me still.

New York Taxicab

A splash of sewer water
across a windshield tints
your sepia memory. Sipping a can
of Coca-Cola, your cells slow down
before being struck by streetlight red.
The swell of a saxophone with a
soprano call, and you expect
to see your angel. Instead,
a self-proclaimed soothsayer—SLAM—
slides into the backseat. The heart
has to be heroic. All you feel is
a syringe that skids the skin. Sopor.

Candy in Outer Space

Bubblegum pop of a lollipop rock

Unwrap the peppermint and float into orbit

Beep! goes infinity

with Laffy Taffy

cavities

Chew the fudge
for a sugar rush

to crack gravity
or maybe even bite a crushed galaxy

Oreos have never tasted
like falling moons
on earth

Pulp fiction in indigo ink

She departs the townhouse in a colorblock,
an envelope in her purse. Within it,
an inscription written in indigo ink: *I keep you
because I honor you.* Poise. Dampening doldrums
turn her amber eyes to enamel. The urban birches
mirror talcum-dusted stationery. She is not a freckled
fawn in a forest. The letter continues: *I met you
through your prose and now know the poetry
of your living. When might we meet
once more?* Her contemplations
are pintucked to the
peacoat's lapel.

In(finite)

The sneakers have stayed white.
The nail polish chips.

Approximate the sway of a tree branch.
Remember the words swiped from a chalkboard.

The clock puns, time runs,
And you are running past –

Interview

[straightening papers] *Tell me your vision of concision.*
Shut up and ask a question.

I'm not sure if I should...
[cocks head] A threat or a promise?

A conscientious objection.
[lights cigarette] You're caught in legends.
Whoever you thought you knew, she's no longer sovereign.

[scribbles, muttering] *The last heart in here...*
You came for an artist's prayer but found a bog.

Or a fossil.
Well, not until we find the diamond.

∞ A Final Flower

Three

Steps in a waltz

Words to give meaning

Rivers: one from two derived



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A Canterbury Fellowship Poetry Manuscript
sponsored by the Santa Clara University English Department

SPECIAL THANKS TO
Ted Rynes, S.J. Kirk Glaser, Ph.D

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